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ABSTRACT

The premise of this paper is that a rhetorical analysis of Lenny Bruce's invective will help in understanding the cultural impact that he has had on twentieth century America. In evaluating his rhetoric in relationship to the audience to which he was preaching, both his rejection and acceptance are found to flow from the same point--an image of someone who was making a wholesale assault, as opposed to a piecemeal reformist modification, on the status quo. His rhetorical stance, the use of his life as the defining principle for freedom and morality, as well as his sacrastic and moralistic vituperation, account for his following in the youth counter-culture of the 1960's. An analysis of Bruce's rhetorical approach notes the fulfillment of the three criteria presented at the beginning of the paper: being, knowing, and doing. The language and structure that his routines took functionally evolved from knowing the needs and responses of his audience and from knowing what had to be done to satisfy that desire. (MKM)

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LENNY BRUCE

A RHETORIC OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

by

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"I'm sorry ... I didn't make you laugh tonight, I wasn't funny ... I'm sorry ... I'm, I'm not a comedian ..."

- Lenny Bruce
1963

Any rhetorical action is subsumed under the criterion of being, knowing and doing. Thomas W. Benson observes:

> Rhetoric is a way of knowing the world, of gaining access to the uniquely rhetorical probabilities that govern public and personal choice for oneself and others; it is a way of constituting the self in a symbolic act generated in a scene comprised of exigencies, constraints, others, and the self; it is a way of exercising control over self, others and by extension the scene. ... Only when rhetorical knowing, being and doing are present together can a given rhetorical act truly be said to take place. In a given rhetorical event the balance among being, knowing and doing is a function of the structure of the ac t and its relation to audience, scene, agent, agency and purpose.[1]

Thus, the basis for defining 'rhetoric' goes well beyond the modalities of written and spoken language and entails the structuralization of entire modes of life. Rhetoric is not merely a verbal act of persuasion; but instead, defines and controls the human condition in terms of acts and actions. It is in this sense that all human activity is symbolic and hence rhetorical in nature.[2] Rhetoric becomes inextricably woven within its defining criterion as a function of being, knowing and doing.

Throughout history human actions of all magnitude have served as rhetorical devices. The concept of martyrdom is merely one case in point. History is a compendium of actors who have sacrificed their lives, both physically and symbolically, in the name of a principle or a cause. The deaths of Socrates, Joan of Arc, Sir Thomas More and Danton suggest only the more dramatic uses of human action as a rhetorical device. By the

same token we have those of a lesser mode of representation who lived out their lives in a less dramatic but no less painful or rhetorical fashion; people like Dr. Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma and Indira Ghandi are exemplary. At either level, therefore, the use of one's life becomes an ultimate commitment to principle and persuasion; it is the ultimat rhetoric.

This paper proposes a rhetorical analysis of Lenny Bruce, the most controversial, if not the most prolific comedian of the twentieth century, viewing him not merely as an entertainer; although his value therein should be justly considered, but rather as the social critic and secular moralist that he viewed himself.[3] This paper evolves from the dual need to understand Lenny Bruce as both a cultural phenomenon of the 1950's and 1960's and as a man who symbolically offered his life to a cause. Through identifying the rhetorical strategies employed by Lenny Bruce as a social critic in relationship to the social climate of the 1950's and 1960's we will be able to come to a more complete understanding of tne dichotomous liberal community to which he spoke that was able to concommitantly revere and suppress the same person. Further, by examining the basis for that rhetoric, the essential human motivation, we can at least try to explain and understand the underlying drives of Lenny Bruce 'the man.'[4]

The rhetorical approach that Lenny Bruce adopted was ideological only to the degree that it acted as a complete denigration of the conservative establishment morality. Further, his approach served as a

whipping post for the liberal counter-culture in the process of rejecting the pseudo-liberal, middle class morality. Above all else, Lenny Bruce must be seen as a trenchant social critic. Little within the American scene evaded his astute and vituperative criticism. It was in this light that his biographer Albert Goldman described him as a Shaman for the liberal American conscience, " ... an exorciser of public demons."[5] Cultural anthropologist Geza Roheim describes the function of the shaman:

> In every primitive society we find the shaman in the center of society and it is a way to show that hie is either a neurotic or a psychotic, or at least that his art is baded on the same mechanisms as a neurosis or psychosis. The shaman makes both visible and public the systems of symbolic fantast that are present in the psyche of every adult member of the society. They are the leaders of an infantile game and the lightning conductors of common anxiety. They fight the demons so that others can hunt the prey and in general fight reality.[6]

The concept of the shaman describes both the approach that Bruce took in addressing his audience and the function that he served for that audience.

Rhetorically, the Bruceian approach was both simplistic and predictable. First, he would present the most daring perceptions of some social convention, most often attacking a 'sacred cow' such as organized religon. He would then procede to shock his audience with his views of middle class values regarding the subject of his diatribe. It is important to understand that the essence of his approach was that instead of just ridiculing liberal morality, a conventional mode of comedy during the

1960's[7], he would ridicule the proper liberal, moral response to a given subject.[8] Second, he would invade the mythology surrounding a given ideological position and then carry the implications of certain social conventions to their logical, indeed, often absurd conclusions. Then, with his audience at his mercy, laughing guiltily at their own moral shortcomings and hyprocrisies, he would adopt the tone of a preacher and in highly moralistic overtones he would predict the negative outcomes of certain ideological conventions and warn against their continued obeyance. Finally, like the shaman of primitive society, he would present a rhetorical solution conveying the very deep 'humanistic rachmones'[9] that he held for the subjects of his diatribe.

While the structure of the Bruceian rhetoric appealed to the moral necessities of the culture to which he was preaching, his langauge and use of words served to develop in him the sense of ethos that we normally attribute to a person 'in the know'. In the opening chapter of his autobiography he describes his language as being flavored with, " ... the jargon of the hipster, the argot of the underworld and Yiddish."[10] For Lenny, the use of language became a way to expound his anti-ideological stance in contrast to the more developed, dominant establishment ideology. Thus, historian Frank Kofsky writes:

> He utilized language as a vehicle for symbolically conveying his outrage and disgust at the situation. For what is most significant about Yiddish, the highly charged langauge of Black musicians, and the argot of the underworld is that each of these functions as the 'mother tongue' so to speak for a group that is beyond the pale by the standards of the community.[11]

By symbolically affronting the dominat culture through word choice, he was able to grasp total attention, even if negative attention, for his anti-ideologcal position.

The basis for Lenny's rhetoric can be found by referring to his autobiography, How To Talk Dirty and Influence People. Essentially, his rhetorical stance was a personal individuation that allowed him to carry out his own fantasies and desires for a moral truth that was lacking in his own Judaic, adolescent background.[12] The impact that his approach had upon his audience was overwhelming. The straight forward, moralistic position that he expounded was exactly what was demaned by the American counter-culture of the 1950's that had been forced to contend with father figure Ike, McCarthyism, organized crime and the spectre of an encroaching technocracy while concurrently experiencing the reversal of the traditional roles of the individual in a democratic society.[13] It was in this fashion that Lenny Bruce became not only an ardent social critic but also a societal shaman; a secular moralist of the twentieth century.[14]

LANGUAGE AND THE DIRTY WORD CONCEPT

Examples of the Bruceian rhetoric and his approach to 'secular moralism' abound. An examination of Lenny's jaundiced, but sensitive perception of language and what he referred to as the 'dirty word' concept is illustrative of his rhetorical approach.

The function of language in the twentieth century has been in the direction of manipulating the mass consumption of conventional ideologies.

In many cases, the manipulative use of language has been used as a substitute for the development of a mass, comprehensive, social and philosophic ideology or moral base. The public mind has been continually befuddled with word magic. Witness such irrational slogans and social colloquialisms which have been used in lieu of a more complete intellectual development of political and social ideology (i.e., Yore President Knows Best (sic), Better Dead than Red, You Can't Fight City Hall, God is on Our Side, The Family that Prays Together Stays Together ...)[15]. Lenny Bruce was a radical social critic who perceived language, in all of its mythological overtones, as an intellectually constraining and socially controlling tool for ideology. As such, he becomes a semanticist rejecting any ideology by the mere token of its morally degenerate base.

As a social critic he involved himself, most conciously, with demystifying the language and social taboos restricting the basic sex values and curiosities of youth and adolescence.[16] As a moralist he drew the linguistic distinction between a word's literal denotation and its ideological, moral connotation. Thus, on the topic of 'dirty words' Lenny would preach to his audience:

> The fact is that you and I have had such bad early training that the worst sound in the world to all of us is when the toilet flush noise finishes before you do. I never could go over to your house and say:
>
> 'Excuse me, where's the toilet?'
>
> I have to get hung up with the facade of:
>
> 'Where's the little boys room?'
>
> 'Oh, you mean the tinkle-dinkle, ha-ha room? Where they have just sashays and cough drops and pastels?'
>
> 'Yeah. I wanna shit in the cough drop box!'
>
> 'Oh, awright.'
>
> The tsi gurnischt is that what puts you into the toilet every time Jim. And unfortunately, intellectual awareness does you no good.

And you know why we got this -- this is really weird -- the censorship! It's motivated by bad early toilet training. Every time --

Old Woman: He made a sissy! Call the police, yeah! Get the policeman up here, he made a sissy. He's not gonna make it no more? Get the probation officer. That's all.

So, if you're thirty-six years old, you drive down the street, you see the red light in the rear vision mirror -- you just crap out:

Cop: You know what you did?
Man: I made a sissy.
Cop: What?
Man: I dunno - what'd I do?
Cop: You made an illegal left turn!
Man: Oh.

That's it. That's the dues.[17]

Here we view Lenny's frontal attack on the structure of child rearing, not only as it regartds toilet training, although he places special emphasis there, but also as it relates to the child as a participant in an important intellectual exchange. Instead of assuming the arduous, though rational approach to child rearing, (i.e., developing for the child a logical basis for an acceptable social behavior) the child is forced, through fear of the authoritarian structure, to conform to a socially accepted norm. In carrying this example to its farthest logical implications he reveals this conventional mode of learning as being absurd at best. The ramifications, he argues, are pervasive.

In another routine, he projects the unrealistic and yet, deterrent power that word suppression poses. Here his likely subject is venereal disease:

> The clap! No one had ever exploited the clap! Then the guy comes to your door for the Community Chest or the United Fund, do you ever say to him, 'Hey wait a minute, I'm gonna give you a donation, but how much of my buck is going to the clap?' And actually, it's way up there on the charts. Or are you like alot of sub-intellectuals who would say, 'Well, no. I wouldn't ask about the clap because only bums and communists get it.' Sure, 7,000,000 war heroes that are bums and communists. You can talk about Leukemia all day long, because there's no specific cure for it, but the clap -- you could whack it out in two days with all the anti-biotics, so how come it's there and stays there? Don't even say the word clap, man:
>
> Doctor: 'It's alright Mrs. Schecker, you've just got a little discharge.'
>
> Because you get Leukemia in a respectable way. But you get the clap by doing it and anybody knows that anybody who does that dirty thing deserves to get the clap.[18]

By suppressing the word, Lenny argues, we suppress the subject. By suppressing the subject we make it 'dirty'. In making the subject dirty we create guilt complexes about our own involvement in the activity. This suppression, a manifestation of the 'good-good culture,'[19] is what Lenny suggests should be repressed and labeled as obscene. Consider here Lenny's vocalization on sex maniacs and their conception:

> Now let me hip you to something. If you believe that there is a God, a God that made your body, and yet you think that you can do anything with that body that's dirty, then the fualt lies with the manufacturere. And then you have to schlep God into court. You know they don't believe that God created the body? Cause they qualify the creativity. They stop it above the knee caps -- and they don't resume it till it passes above the Adam's apple. They give it lewd connotations Jim.
>
> You know in the backs of those 'Fun Shops' you'll

> see guys looking through racks and racks of pictures of ladies' nay-nays wrapped in cellophane. All those pictures. Those guys looking through racks there. One eight by ten nude photostudy of a chick that's held together by an aluminum hymen -- that staple that the guy will try to peer around ... How is it -- and the records are there for you to view -- that constantly, the sex maniacs that violate your daughters murder them after they violate them? And have good religious backgrounds, consistently. Is it a little possible that these guys come from the kind of a family where the father might have been that moralist that went on record to say:
>
> > 'I wouldn't let any of my kids see any pictures of any half nude tramps! No tramps run around my hous half naked!
> >
> > 'Christ! What can that look like? How erotic can it be? How erotic that my father's such a nut what with telling my sister to cover-up and she's only six years old. Well, I'm gonna see what that looks like someday, and if it's as dirty as my old man says it is, I'm gonna kill it!'
>
> Give me your next sex maniac, and every time I'll show you:
>
> 'We don't understand! He had a good religous background.'
>
> I'm bip he did, man. Yeah! And he's gonna pay the dues for it.[20]

Here again, Lenny concludes with the adverse, detrimental effects of the preachings of a 'good good' ideology that somewhere along the line went awry and began labeling words and concepts alike as 'dirty'. While his portrayals were labeled 'sick'[21] and absurd, the logic upon which they were based was undeniable. The blame for most of this word suppression is latter placed upon organized religon but the essential point that Lenny makes here is cogent in itself: you can' stop knowledge and the flow of informatin without jeopardizing freedom and morality. Thus he was able to argue that the perception of moral deviation and obscenity

was a manifestation of information control, word suppression:

> I want to help you if you have a dirty word problem. There are none ... and I'll spell it out logically for you. Here is a toilet. Specifically, that's what you're concerned with here, specifics - if I can tell you a dirty toilet joke, we must have a dirty toilet. If we take this toilet and boil it, ... and it's clean-clean, I could never tell you a dirty toilet joke about this toilet. ... This toilet has no nervous system, no level of consciousness. It is not aware -- it is a dumb toilet. It cannot be obscene, it's impossible. If it could be obscene it could be cranky. It could be a communist toilet. It can be none of these things it's a dopey toilet, Jim. So nobody can ever offend you by telling you a dirty toilet story.[22]

CONCLUSIONS

The original premise of this paper was that a rhetorical analysis of Lenny Bruce's invective would help us to understand the cultural impact that he has had upon twentieth century America. In evaluating his rhetoric in relationship to the audience to which he was preaching we find both his rejection and acceptance flowing from the same point of departure. His most devoted followers as well as his most ardent prosecutors saw in him, "... someone who was making a wholesale assault, as opposed to a piecemeal reformist modification, on the status quo."[23] That Lenny was to become the leader in memorium of the youth counter-culture of the 1960's is neither a secret nor surprising. More than anything else, his rhetorical stance; the use of his life as the defining principle for freedom and morality, as well as his sarcastic and moralistic vituperation, accounts for his following. As a rationalist and extreme moralist, Lenny was the likely candidate to fill the ;hero; role for the alienated youth culture of the 1960's.

As regards Lenny Bruce the man, agina the rhetorical anlytic approach is most revealing. At the beginning of this paper it was argued that any 'rhetoric' necessitated three criteria: being, knowing, and doing. In examining the rhetorical approach used by Lenny Bruce we find the fulfillment of all three criteria and as such the defining characteristics of the man. Lenny was always cognizant of his audience and what he was trying to portray for them. The very careful selection of language and the structure that his routines took were functionally evolved form the needs and responses of his audience; not in terms of applause; but rather in terms of what they craved and desired. Afterall, before people could walk out on Lenny's act they had to walk in. And people were walking out right up to his final performance. It seems untenable to assume that after 1960 people would go to see Lenny perform without knowing in advance what he was going to say. Thus, Lenny knew not only for what the society craved, but also what had to be done to satisfy that desire.

In the final analysis, Lenny Bruce was a rationalist in an authoritarian, irrational world. Yet even in spite of his rational, straightforward rhetorical stance, he could not win the respect of the establishment.[24] However, this is not to say that his impact was not felt, and felt as a serious challenge to the authoritarian structure at which it was aimed. In point of fact, the strength of his rhetoric might be evaluated in terms of the establishment's response to it. The more, it seems, that Lenny came down upon the repressive authoritarianism of the 'Power Elite', the more they tried

to suppress him; right up until his death in 1965. I would appear therefore that as both a man and a phenomenon, Lenny Bruce purported the ultimate rhetoric.

ENDNOTES

* I would like to acknowledge Frank Puccio for his assistance in supplying recordings of Lenny Bruce and for his many hours of discussion regarding the cultural aspects of Lenny Bruce. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Osborne for his valuable suggestions regarding the manuscript.

1
Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X," The Quaterly Journal of Speech 60 (February, 1974): 1.

2
This position was initially developed by Kenneth Burke. Among other places see: Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method, Berkley: University of California Press, 1966.

3
Lenny once remarked to Steve Allen on the Tonight Show: "I'm not a comedian and I'm not sick! Society is sick. And I'm the doctor with my scalpel pointed at the values of the American society."

4
Frank Kofsky, Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), 19.

5
Albert Goldman, "A Lenny Bruce Triptych: The Comedy of Lenny Bruce," in Freakshow, (New YOrk: Athenium Press, 1974), 187-200.

6
Geza Roheim, The Origin and Function of Culture, 1943.

7
It was the habit of such comedians as Shelly Berman, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Mort Sahl and Bob Newhart to ridicule the average liberal morality in a topoical fashion. Lenny Bruce differed from these comedians in two ways: 1. He did not project a specifically topical humor; his approach transcended the specific day to day activities, but rather ridiculed society in a gestalt, 2. He did no specifically ridicule liberal morality, but rather the proper response to a given subject.

8
Goldman, 190.

9
Rachmones is Yiddish (derived from the Hebrew) and refers to human compassion and empathy.

10
Lenny Bruce, How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography, (New York: Playboy Press, 1963), 6.

11
Kofsky, 73.

12
Throughout his autobiography he talks about the childhood he grew up in which was lacking any direct moral leadership save for the types of mythologies that he was later to dispel. The opening paragraph of his autobiography is exemplary:

> Filipinos come quick; colored men are built with abnormally large (Their wangs look like a baby's arm with an apple in its fist); ladies with short hair are lesbians; if you want to keep your man rub alum on your pussy. Such bits of erotic folklore were related daily to my mother by Mrs. Janesky, a middle-aged widow who lived across the alley, despire the fact that she had volumes of books delived by the postman every month - A San Sex Life, Ovid the God of Love, ... in plain brown wrappers marked 'Personal'.

13
It was fuirng the 1950's that the traditional role of the individual changed drastically. The 19th centruy, production oriented work ethic was being replaced by the 20th century, consumer oriented social ethic. William H. Whyte first discovered the new 'Social Ethic' in 1957: The Organization Man, (New York: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1957), 7:

> The social ethic is the contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual. Its major propositions are three: 1. a belief in the group as a source of creativity, 2. a belief in belongingness as the ultimate need of the individual; and 3. a belief in the application of science to achieve this belongingness.

14
Kofsky, 20.

15
Ibid.

16
Wilhelm Reich, The Mass Psychology of Facism, (New York: Albion Press) 1970 (paper edition), 24-26.

17
John Cohen, ed., The Essential Lenny Bruce, (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1970) 168-170

[18] Bruce, How To Talk Dirty, 69-70.

[19] Cohen, 219-220.

[20] Ibid.

[21] It was Time magazine that first labeled Lenny Bruce as the 'sickest' of the new 'sick' comedians. Time, August 15, 1960, 48.

[22] Kofsky, 27-28. (As transcribed from the recording by Fantasy records called: To is a Preposition; Come is a Verb.)

[23] Kofsky, 23.

[24] Of course, this lack of popularity is not very surprising, as historian Frank Kofsky explains:

> ... the establishment has traditionally relied on authoritarian and irrational ideology as a means of ruling while maintaining soical stability unimpaired. (p. 28.)